



# BAM blog

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2017

## Frederick Douglass at BAM

By 1860, Brooklyn had become the third largest city in America. As a thriving port city with significant trades in sugar, tobacco, and cotton, but also the location of Weeksville, one of the earliest settlements established by free slaves, Brooklyn's relationship to slavery is as complicated as the nation's as a whole. Throughout this period, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass came to speak against racial injustice. A new book, *Frederick Douglass in Brooklyn* by historian Theodore Hamm, recounts his traverse in the "City of Churches" with many original source materials, including excerpts of his speeches. Many of Douglass' messages resonate as much today as 150 years ago. And as part of this year's *Brooklyn Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, BAM has invited the multi-talented performer Carl Hancock Rux (The Exalted, Next Wave 2015) to read excerpts from the book, with Hamm providing commentary. Here, Hamm highlights Douglass' four visits to BAM, which has served as the nexus for public gatherings in Brooklyn.

Frederick Douglass made four notable visits to BAM during the 1860s, its first decade of existence.

Academy's first location, on Montague Street near what was then City Hall (and is now Borough Hall).

Douglass' first appearance—on Friday evening, May 15, 1863—was widely promoted, and also featured a performance by the Hutchinson Family Singers, a popular musical act of the era. Douglass delivered his speech "What Shall Be Done with the Negro?" to a packed house of 3000 people. As reported by Sydney Howard Gay (a key figure in the Underground Railroad) in the *New York Tribune*, "the beauty and fashion of the City of Churches were largely represented in the audience, with here and there a colored lady or a colored gentleman sitting in the audience," thus illustrating Douglass'

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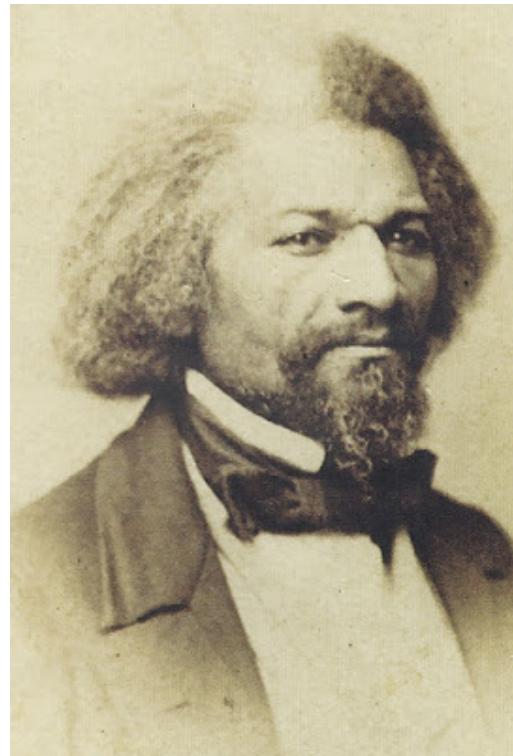
call for racial equality.

"Can the white and colored people of this country," Douglass asked, "be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together, in the same country, under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? I answer most unhesitatingly, I believe they can." ([Read the full transcript of Douglass' speech here](#).) After his well-received speech, the Hutchinson Family closed the performance by leading the audience in a chorus of "John Brown's Body."

Such an enthusiastic reception during his visit made what happened prior to second visit—in late January of 1866—all the more troubling. Knowing that Douglass was likely to launch a pointed attack on President Andrew Johnson's betrayal of Abraham Lincoln's legacy, a faction among BAM's board of directors tried to prevent Douglass from taking the stage. They did so on the utterly spurious grounds that "no black person could take the stage at BAM," the 1863 speech notwithstanding.

Douglass' close friend Theodore Tilton—Beecher's right-hand man and editor of *The Independent*, a leading proponent of black equality—helped convince the majority of BAM's board to overrule the initial denial. When Tilton introduced Douglass at the Monday evening speech, he pulled no punches in criticizing the BAM directors hostile to his friend. But Tilton's jabs seemed pretty soft compared to the blows Douglass delivered.

Never one to mince words, Douglass began his oration to a very friendly (and once again, capacity) crowd by commenting directly on the scandal. "The day is coming," he declared, "when Brooklyn will be quite ashamed that any subjection could have been made to a man appearing before it for the purpose of vindicating the cause of justice, of humanity and of liberty." And throughout his two-hour address, he frequently circled back to the controversy to illustrate his points about the need for the North to be resolute in pushing for black equality.



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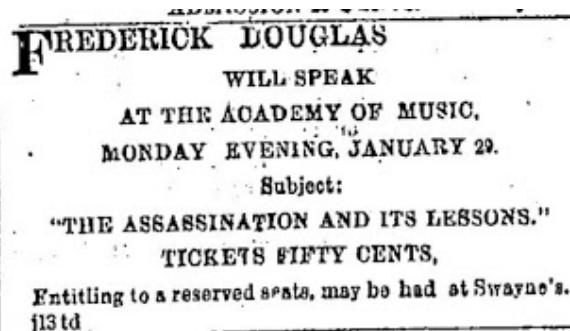
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The main focus of Douglass' talk that night was clarified by the title, "The Assassination and Its Lessons." It had been only nine months since Booth killed Lincoln, and the wounds were still fresh. But the harm to the cause of equality was only compounded by Andrew Johnson's concessions to the former Confederates.

Douglass thus cast Lincoln in a poetic light:

*One thing about Abraham Lincoln will always make him dear to the struggles for fame. He was indebted to himself for himself—largely the architect of his own fortune. So far as man can be he was a self-made man. A worker, a toiler; the captain of a flat boat; a craftsman; a worker in wood, in iron, on the soil. A man who took life at the roughest, with brave hands grappled with it and conquered; a man who traveled far, but made the road on which he traveled; who ascended high, but built the ladder on which he climbed. Flung overboard as it were in the midnight storm and left without oars or life preservers, he swam in safety to shore, where other men would have despaired and gone down.*

*(Applause.)*

In discussing Lincoln's successor, Douglass could barely conceal his contempt. "What shall be said" of Johnson, he asked, "if instead of accepting the opportunity of settling the Negro question forever, he hands it down to coming generations, to foster future rebellions and breed other assassinations?" Alas, such were prophetic words, indeed.

Douglass returned to BAM twice in 1869, the first time to present his scholarly discussion of William of Orange, and the second time as a participant in a meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, the suffragist group. Neither occasion was nearly as controversial or as memorable—but the "Assassination and Its Lessons" was a tough act to follow.

Find more about Brooklyn Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 2017 [here](#).

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